

# Forming Positive Student-Teacher Relationships



Many cognitive theorists argue that learning is a social event, and studies have proven that both teachers and students will pay the price if teachers neglect to form emotionally warm, supportive relationships with and among their students. To improve students' chances for academic success, educators must strive to form meaningful personal relationships with students.

## What Elements Characterize Positive Student-Teacher Relationships?

According to Pianta, positive student-teacher relationships are characterized by *open communication, as well as emotional and academic support that exist between students and teachers*. Student-teacher relationships become particularly important during early adolescence, as students move from the supportive environment of elementary school to the more disjointed atmosphere of a middle school or junior high.

## Good Relationships: What Do Students Have in Mind?

While both at-risk and academically successful students believe it is important for teachers to treat them respectfully and to value them and their efforts, the two groups of students have very different ideas about what makes student-teacher relationships meaningful (Phelan).

**Academically successful** students value a teacher's willingness to help them in academic matters. For example, they may not require face-to-face meeting, but they do want personal notes on papers.

**At-risk students** encounter more troubles outside of school and are more easily distracted from their schoolwork. As a result, they desire more face-to-face contact with their teachers. These students feel that caring teachers "legitimize their personal concerns and also help them refocus energy on such long-term goals as high school graduation" (Phelan).

## Relationships: How Do They Impact the Classroom?



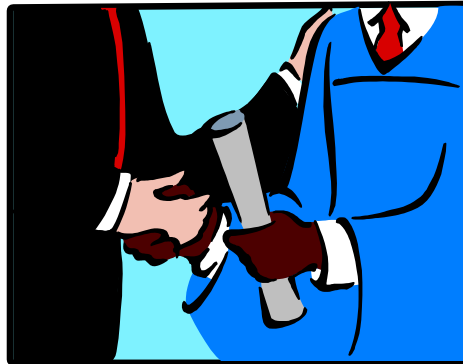
Students are more likely to be emotionally and intellectually invested in the classes in which they have positive relationships with their teachers (Phelan). Therefore, teachers who build positive relationships with their students may enjoy the following benefits:

- Increased levels of students' interested in and enjoyment of the class.
- Increased levels of students' academic achievement (Murray).
- A decrease in the occurrence of classroom disruptions (Phelan).

## How Do Positive Student-Teacher Relationships Affect Academically Successful Students?

High-achieving students will do what is expected of them, but if a strong student-teacher relationship hasn't been formed, they tend to distance themselves from the teacher and from the coursework (Phelan). Obviously, if teachers form positive relationships with academically successful students, these students are more likely to be engaged in the class and internalize the course materials.

## How Do Positive Relationships Affect At-Risk Students?



Not surprisingly, some of the poorest student-teacher relationships have been found among those students who eventually drop out of school. Convincing evidence of this trend was provided by Whelage and Rutter's study on student alienation and rejection of school. One of the variables in their analysis was teacher interest in students. "When those who eventually became dropouts were asked to rate Teacher Interest in Students on a 4.0 scale, marks of fair to poor were given by 56% of the Hispanics, 50% of the blacks, and 59% of the whites." (Testerman). However, it's not uncommon for students who are failing most of their courses to earn above-average grades in those classes where they have a caring relationship with their teachers (Phelan). Clearly, if teachers were to provide a caring and supportive environment for at-risk students, they could positively affect the students' attitudes about school and increase the likelihood of their staying on to graduate from high school.

## How Can Teachers Improve Student-Teacher Relationships?

- Learn as much as possible about students' personal interests and backgrounds. Try to connect their personal interests with classroom work, where possible. Also, learning about students' cultures and religious backgrounds may help you relate to them more effectively.
- Include journal-writing activities, weekly student-teacher meetings, and class discussions, which enable students to voice and teachers to address concerns.
- Implement [social emotional learning opportunities](#), which improve students' abilities to understand their own and others' emotions (Murray).
- Be aware of classroom dynamics. Try to diffuse tensions that may exist between students.
- Be patient with those students who are disruptive and disrespectful. Bonding with disruptive students may improve their behavior in the classroom.
- Model appropriate behavior. Students are very sensitive to teacher's attitudes towards the school and the class in general; therefore, teachers must be extremely self-reflective, making certain that they are modeling positive behaviors for the class. Videotaping several class sessions may make teachers aware of any negative feelings they may be projecting towards their students.

### Additional Resources for Teachers

Pianta, Robert C., Enhancing Relationships Between Children and Teachers. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Assn., 1999.

### References

Murray, Christopher. "Supportive teacher-student relationships: Promoting the Social and Emotional Health of Early Adolescents with High Incidence Disabilities." Childhood Education 78.5 (2002): 285-290.

Phelan, Patricia, Ann Davidson, Hanh Locke, and Cao Thanh. "Speaking up: Students' Perspectives on School." Phi Delta Kappan 73.9 (1992): 695-704.

Testerman, Janet. "Holding At-Risk Students: The Secret Is One-on-One." Phi Delta Kappan 77.5 (1996): 364-365.